

Capturing Actions of Communities: Towards Virtual Ethnography and Digital Tools in Researching Organizations and Workplace Learning

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Abstract

In this chapter, we introduce the ethnographic research methodology as a starting point in organisational and workplace learning research. In approaching learning at work as a practice-based and communal phenomenon, this strategy has been found suitable for studying its nature and practices. We focus on new and innovative ways to conduct ethnography - especially virtual ethnography and digital tools. In this chapter, we first briefly describe the background of ethnographic methodology. We then move on to consider why workplace learning should also be studied in virtual environments and how digital tools, such as subjective cameras, can be utilized in conducting ethnographic research. Then, we present two empirical case examples. The first case illustrates the study of informal learning using ethnography in a virtual environment. The second case illustrates the use of subjective cameras in a subjective, evidence-based ethnographic process. Using these case examples, we show how the basic principles of ethnography can be strengthened and applied in virtual environments and with the help of digital tools in workplace learning research. We also consider some potential ideas for further ethnographic research on workplace learning alongside ethical matters related to ethnographic and virtual ethnographic research.

Keywords: *ethnography, organization ethnography, virtual ethnography, workplace learning, subjective evidence-based ethnography*

1 Introduction

Ethnography is a research strategy that focuses on cultures, cultural practices, and people who act as parts of these cultures. It is linked to the social sciences and is concerned with “human studying human” (Reed, 2017), such as by focusing on the practices and interactions of people in different contexts (Fetterman, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The emphasis on cultural understanding in ethnographic research is rooted in anthropology, and it goes back 2 centuries, to when anthropologists traveled to new continents to understand unfamiliar cultures, people, and their everyday lives. The subjects of anthropological and ethnographic research have changed over time, but ethnographic research has a multidisciplinary nature, and this expansion into new areas and fields over time is expected. As an empirical and qualitative approach, an ethnographic research strategy can be applied, especially when the aim of the study is to describe, structure, and theorize about complex and often hidden cultural phenomena (Paloniemi & Collin, 2010). Ethnography is also a relevant strategy when the researcher wants

to understand social and psychological phenomena, processes, and their effects on people and communities (Heyl, 2001) or to describe and understand different situations and events from the participants' perspectives (Cohen et al., 2007; Pole & Morrison, 2003). The benefit of ethnography is that it enables a comprehensive and detailed description of the target phenomenon (Heyl, 2001). Thus, the ultimate aim of ethnographic research is to describe what happens in various contexts and environments, as well as how people act, see, and interpret their own actions and those of others.

Research on adult learning, particularly in the workplace context and in different communities, has increased over the last 20 years, focusing, for example, on the concepts of workplace learning, organizational learning, and human resource development. Hence, most previous studies have been conducted in organizational and management research and in educational and adult learning research. Although the methodologies used to study adult learning have been diversified, most research has focused on building theories or utilizing quantitative research methods (Easterby-Smith et al., 2009). According to Marjolein et al. (2006), previous studies that focused on learning processes at work were based on questionnaires and interviews. They suggested that diverse methods and research tools should be applied to explore professional learning in the work context. The methods used in the study of workplace learning and its processes have been conventional, and a balance between quantitative and qualitative research approaches has also been recommended (Easterby-Smith et al., 2009).

To contribute to the contextual understanding of workplace learning, previous studies have called for the use of an ethnographic research strategy, specifically observational research (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020; Collin, 2006; Baskett, 1993). As workplace actors, activities, problems, and tools become increasingly complex and diverse, the benefits of ethnography as a methodological strategy are increasingly recognized. Ethnography is especially useful (1) when we know little about the phenomenon at hand, (2) when we aim to collect detailed information and reach a comprehensive, situational-based understanding, and (3) when we want to connect the retrieved information to the context in which it emerged. Therefore, the focus of interest in the work community and organizational learning may be on interactions, relations, networks, and work practices. Consequently, the use of ethnography in the study of workplace learning has increased in recent years (e.g., Collin, 2006; Snoeren et al., 2015; Riera et al., 2020; Lemmetty & Collin, 2020; Lemmetty, 2020a, 2020b). For example, the ethnographic strategy has been employed to examine learning at work and relevant phenomena in hospitals (e.g., Collin et al., 2013; Hägg-Martinell et al., 2017), technology organizations (e.g., Collin et al., 2018; Lemmetty & Collin, 2020; Lemmetty, 2020a, 2020b), and educational contexts (e.g., Pastuhov & Sivenius, 2020). Growing interest in ethnographic methodology has also occurred in the broader context of organizational and workplace research, which Rouleau et al. (2014) describe as an “ethnographic turn” (p. 2). Thus, while *organizational ethnography* is not a new idea (e.g., Selznick, 1949), it has gained acceptance as a research method and even a paradigm in recent decades (John van Maanen, 2011; Rouleau et al., 2014).

The reasons for the growing use of the ethnographic research approach in organizational and management research derive from the changes taking place in working life. Work and practices in organizations have become more complex in terms of intensified competition, the time and space of the work, and the wide variety of technological tools and platforms used in the work (van Maanen, 2011; Yanow, 2009). At the same time, social media and virtual channels have exploded in popularity—especially in the “Google generation” born after 1993—and have forced researchers to exploit and examine them (Murthy, 2013). Regarding digitalization, the importance of remote work is increasing, especially in the fields of expert and knowledge work.

Most recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic has increased the role of remote work. In these contexts, organizational and workplace learning ethnography can no longer be unambiguously linked to a certain physical place and time.

Remote work creates new opportunities and challenges for the learning and development of employees and organizations. As formal learning situations move online and informal processes become revised to accommodate increasingly diverse combinations of remote work and “normal” work, how they are viewed in ethnography, must also change. As a result, there has been growing interest in exploiting methods that help to grasp subtle shifts in organizational life (Rouleau et al., 2014). There have been advances in the use of social media, and the huge variety of technological tools has renewed the workplace and increased the variety of settings that can be used in ethnographic research (e.g., the internet, mobile phones, videos, and GPS). In this context, the focus should be on how to promote organizational ethnography as a paradigm (e.g., by writing about organizations in a different way) (van Maanen, 2011). It is not only a matter of researching online environments or applying new digital tools; it is also a complete re-evaluation of research practices and processes, starting by defining the concept of “the field,” the role of the researcher in the new context, and ethical issues related to virtual ethnography (Rouleau et al., 2014).

In this chapter, we first briefly describe the background of ethnographic methodology. We then move on to consider why workplace learning should also be studied in virtual environments and how digital tools, such as subjective cameras, can be utilized in conducting ethnographic research. Then, we present two empirical case examples. The first case illustrates the study of informal learning using ethnography in a virtual environment. The second case illustrates the use of subjective cameras in a subjective, evidence-based ethnographic process. Using these case examples, we show how the basic principles of ethnography can be strengthened and applied in virtual environments and with the help of digital tools in workplace learning research.

2 Virtuality and Digital Tools in Ethnographic Research in Organizations and Communities

2.1 Background of Ethnographic Research on Organizations and Workplaces

The aim of ethnographic research is to describe and explain the activities of people in their environments (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). The trajectory of ethnographic research does not always appear to advance, and its findings are not always generalizable or reproducible (Davies, 1992). Ethnography is well suited for exploring community activities, social interactions, and cultures, especially in small groups (Pole & Morrison, 2003) and in their own contexts (e.g., Coffrey, 1999; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Thus, the ethnographic research approach has been utilized to study learning at work by focusing on the diverse sociocultural and contextual circumstances interwoven in the learning processes of individuals, collectives, or organizations (see, for example, Lemmetty, 2020b; Riera et al., 2020).

Previous studies on workplace learning have noted that ethnographic research progresses from the examination of an extensive research area (e.g., learning situations) or entity to a detailed focus on smaller, more structured areas (e.g., the specific learning acts of individuals or groups) (Collin, 2006; Lemmetty, 2020a). In this funnel-like process, data collection, analysis, and interpretation are intertwined (Davies, 1999). All stages of ethnography, from data collection and analysis to writing, overlap and cannot be separated in practice (Kunda, 2013).

Additionally, in ethnography, it is not necessary to commit to a single theoretical frame of reference or to adhere to a theory-based research approach; rather, the richness of perspectives can be increased through theory triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Although there are no clear guidelines for conducting ethnographic research—for its process or stages—some basic starting points, concepts, and areas related to ethnographic research should be examined.

A key concept in ethnography is *field*. In organizational ethnography, it is important to understand how a field is defined and the factors that should be considered in its examination (Tuncalp & Le, 2014). Burrell (2009) defined the field as “the stage on which the social processes under study take place” (p. 182). Thus, by focusing on interactions between people, ethnographic observation in the field offers the possibility of understanding the sociocultural nature of the phenomenon being studied (e.g., workplace learning). The ethnographic field is thus the entity in which processes, social interactions, goals, and boundaries emerge. At the same time, the field is defined as the process of empirical data formation, and its boundaries are ultimately determined by the research questions, interpretations, and writing (Fingerroos, 2003).

On the other hand, *fieldwork* refers to the length of time a researcher spends in the field and the activities that they perform while in the field. During fieldwork, the aim of the researcher is to gain an understanding of the research phenomena from the perspective of the subjects. It is also important to link and relate the researcher’s interpretations and understanding to the wider culture and context. Ethnography is well suited to viewing organizations in their broad (e.g., societal) contexts (Watson, 2012).

Although the concept of *context* is widely used in organizational research, it is vaguely and weakly defined (see more about the concept of context in organizational research in the article by Ostroff, 2018). In ethnography, context often refers to the broader understanding and knowledge that underpins the research phenomenon and the relationships between micro-observations and the macro level. In conducting their research field ethnographers refer to the context of a work community or organization or a broader entity, such as a particular industry, event, state, or phenomenon. Thus, context is the broad setting in which the phenomenon under study is viewed, while field is the object of research about which observations are made and through which the context is understood.

In ethnographic fieldwork, parallel data collection methods, such as observations, field diaries and notes, interviews, discussions, and documents, are commonly utilized (O’Reilly, 2011). Typically, observation data, such as field notes and field tapes, are supplemented by interviews or discussions with participants. Combining data from observations and interviews can also be described as *cross-validation* (Cohen et al., 2007). Observations by the researcher can produce rich descriptions of actions performed in the setting, while interviews enable the members of a work organization to voice their experiences. In any case, the importance of fieldwork in initiating or advancing the researcher’s ongoing process of interpretation is crucial; observing and interviewing the participants are the main means by which a comprehensive description of the phenomenon or culture is constructed (Heyl, 2001). Observations can be conducted by monitoring people in selected contexts or shadowing key persons in their everyday work (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The focus of observations can be on different agents and participants in an organization, such as representatives of professional groups and teams (Emerson et al., 2001). The duration of shadowing or observing work can vary from a few hours to several days. It might sometimes be appropriate to shadow an entire work shift (e.g., in a hospital) or to shadow only for a short period (e.g., in an office). Observations can be

analyzed as primary empirical data, or if they are not the focus of the analysis, they can offer useful contextual information in locating key persons and key incidents within their setting.

During fieldwork, the researcher makes choices about what is relevant to the research and the situations in which the observations should be made. These events (i.e., incidents) can be described as arenas in which the activity that forms the field takes place (Zilber, 2014). *Key events* are interesting situations that occur in the field, which the researcher recognizes during fieldwork and/or afterwards, when analyzing their field notes (Lemmetty, 2020a). Emerson (2004) described three factors as characteristics of key events: (1) they are not necessarily dramatic or profoundly relevant from the perspective of the examinees; (2) they are part of everyday life; and (3) their significance is not necessarily clear at the start of the analysis, but they arouse the researcher's interest in examining them more closely. Because the processes of data collection and analysis partly overlap in ethnography, a preliminary understanding of key events arises during observations but is deepened and refined in the analysis stage. Zilber (2014) presented several questions that can be asked to support the analysis of key events:

Who organized the event? Are they central or peripheral actors in the field? What are the (manifested and hidden) interests of the event? Is this event part of a series of field-level events? Or perhaps the first or the last instance of a series? Does the studied event attract a variety of field-level actors or a specific subsection? What other compatible events take place in the field? What is the centrality of the studied event, given those other events and compared with them? (p. 105)

Many methods of analysis have been applied to the ethnography of workplace learning (e.g., Collin, 2006; Lemmetty & Collin, 2020; Lemmetty, 2020a; Lemmetty, 2020b; Collin et al., 2011). Ethnographic data should be analyzed in its context, considering cultural and other contextual aspects (e.g., work aims and tasks and the nature of work). Thus, in ethnographic research conducted in the contexts of workplaces and organizations, it is typical to analyze discourses, practices, cultures, structures, and interactions. Within these frames, many basic qualitative analysis methods might be appropriate for addressing the research questions. For example, when focusing on content, thematic content analysis may be a suitable analysis method, whereas discourse analysis might be appropriate for analyzing interactions and discussions. Ethnographic analysis usually aims to create a multifaceted picture of the phenomenon at hand, which is enabled by combining different analytical tools with ethnographic analysis.

2.2 Studying Workplace Learning in Virtual Environments

Virtual ethnography is implemented in ways that differ from traditional face-to-face ethnography, for instance, by observing interactions in digital environments or on the internet (Purli, 2017; Kozinets, 2015). It has been described as a technique that relies on virtual participant observations of interactions in online chat rooms, group blogs, social networks, and discussion boards. However, workplace learning has rarely been studied by virtual ethnography. The area can therefore be considered partially undeveloped as a methodology. Because (expert) work is increasingly being done remotely, people more often interact in virtual environments in traditional workplaces (e.g., in Slack, Teams, and Hangouts). Thus, it is suggested that a remote environment also affects learning.

Workplace learning is often categorized as *informal* or *formal* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Formal learning refers to learning in structured situations such as training or courses (Tynjälä, 2008). Since the beginning of the 2000s, in addition to in-house training,

online courses and training have been utilized in the development of employees' competence and skills. They have been seen as useful because they often offer opportunities for flexible learning that is detached from place and time. They also leave the individual with greater responsibility for his or her own learning. For example, employees can decide when and how to learn (Conn, 2002). Informal learning refers to all learning that takes place during work and through work practices (Janssen et al., 2016; Kyndt & Baert, 2013). Acquiring new knowledge through developmental work, sharing experiences with colleagues, and collective problem solving have been considered forms of informal learning at work. As remote work and virtual work environments become more common, informal learning at work will increasingly take place within the framework of virtual environments.

However, the distinction between informal and formal learning has also been criticized, as it implies that work and jobs are informal in terms of learning, but pedagogical frameworks that influence the progression and planning of learning processes, artifacts, and practices are also emerging in workplaces (Billett, 2014). Thus, the following question has been raised: Why is learning in the workplace less formal than the learning and training that occurs in schools and courses? As access to virtual work environments and digital learning tools has increased, it seems that the boundaries between informal and formal learning have become increasingly blurred. As learning requirements grow, it should be possible to continuously develop new knowledge and skills during work (Lemmetty, 2020b). Virtual environments can aid learning processes, but they also place constraints and delays on learning. However, very little research is available on the pedagogical characteristics, frameworks, artifacts, and individual or collective practices that emerge in virtual work environments and how they affect learning processes and culture. Because virtual ethnography can provide useful approaches and tools for examining these phenomena, its importance in future research on adult education should not be underestimated.

One aspect of the study of learning at work is the communal and the practical actions attached to it. The term *community of practice* refers to a group of people whose members share a particular skill or competence (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Fuller & Unwin, 2003). A community can be built around a shared goal, or it can be formed to create or compile the necessary information. The sharing of different individuals' knowledge is essential in a community of practice.

In workplace learning, a community of practice is often a group of workplace members who share information and learn from each other. The sharing of information and participation in a community of practice requires interactions and meetings between community members. As workplaces become increasingly multifaceted, communities of practice not only combine or engender face-to-face encounters but also function through a variety of communication tools. Ethnographic research, which can be used to examine the activities of communities of practice at the individual, community, and organizational levels, offers opportunities for investigating the formation of virtually-functioning communities of practice. Online ethnography is less obtrusive, more accessible, and more convenient than conventional ethnography. Furthermore, it makes possible higher degrees of participation in observed communities.

2.3 Subjective Evidence-Based Ethnography and the Study of Human Actions

One of the most ambitious aims of ethnography is to capture actions and thoughts in their context—which is the workplace environment in this case—and as they unfold. This requires being able to relate what people do and say to where they are, what they use, and with whom they interact. In ethnographic investigations, these psychological, social, and material

dimensions are combined in ways that are rare in other methodologies and acutely needed in scientific research (Glăveanu, 2020a). However, ethnographers face a great practical and methodological challenge: they are tasked with the difficult job of recording activity in an unintrusive and descriptive manner and focusing on behavior (e.g., the thoughts, emotions, and intentions of the observed individuals) to make inferences from it. Of course, the key issue is that the participants cannot both perform their activity and express reflections about what they think and how they feel while performing it. This is the longstanding challenge of introspection—the impossibility of being both observer and observed at the same time (Danziger, 1980). In ethnography, it is not feasible to ask participants to play both roles, so their thoughts and intentions are usually inferred later, based on an analysis of field notes. Although there are sustained guidelines on how to write field notes efficiently and in a way that does justice to the lived experiences of both researchers and participants (Clifford, 1990), ethnographic descriptions remain intrinsically selective. However, this is not necessarily a limitation because seasoned ethnographers are especially skilled in focusing on and conveying what is essential in their writing and reflections, but novice researchers could experience it as a formidable challenge.

One way to address the various difficulties associated with ethnographic work is to conduct *subjective evidence-based ethnography* (SEBE) (Lahlou et al., 2015; Glăveanu, 2019). This method is based on the use of “subjective cameras,” which are audio and video devices placed at eye level to record human activity from the perspective of the participant. SEBE is considered *subjective* because it helps researchers capture the first-person perspectives of people wearing a subjective camera. It is *evidence-based* because this perspective is documented through the use of a recording that becomes material evidence that is then analyzed by the researcher together with the participant. Finally, it is *ethnographic* because it reveals the path of human action in its context. Indeed, with the help of subjective cameras, while we cannot not see participants *per se*, we can notice a great deal about their environments and their interactions within these environments.

Thus, the SEBE methodology is particularly well suited to the study of human activity, which can be underpinned by several theories, including *activity theory* (Engeström & Kerosuo, 2007) and *pragmatist accounts of action* (Joas, 1993). In particular, the latter is based on the premise that we at all times occupy various positions in the world, which are simultaneously physical, social, and symbolic. For example, we are positioned through our bodies, by the social roles we adopt, and in discourse and culture. Specific to human action, however, is the fact that we are never “trapped” in a single position (Gillespie & Martin, 2014). On the contrary, we often exchange positions and include their respective perspectives in dialogues that expand our spheres of possible action (Glăveanu, 2020b). These acts of repositioning and exploration of the possible, in addition to their associated constraints, are enabled by social and material interactions. In this regard, SEBE has proven to be particularly useful; it helps us document the positions and perspectives of the participants as they unfold in relation to the positions and perspectives of others within a rich material context.

A unique feature of SEBE is that it cuts across classic dichotomies, such as those between the subjective and the objective. Practically, the video recording offers an “objective” account of what was seen, heard, and done by the participant. In the interview, the participant complements this account with a subjective retelling of their actions, intentions, beliefs, and emotions. However, most importantly, SEBE operates at an intersubjective level, as the research findings are not derived from the video or the interview alone but from the account co-constructed by the researcher and the participant. Their dialogue illuminates the recorded

actions and helps organize them according to specific frameworks, while simultaneously refining and advancing these frameworks.

Another notable research dichotomy transgressed by the use of this innovative methodology is that between thought and behavior. Many behaviorist methods and techniques have been used in organizational research (e.g., Ebert & Freibichler, 2017), but there is also emergent phenomenological literature that emphasizes lived experience (e.g., Anosike et al., 2012). Through the use of SEBE, we are able to bring together the study of behavior and the study of affect and cognition in different stages, from the recording to the interview. This avoids a common problem in ethnographic studies caused by the use of think-aloud protocols (Jääskeläinen, 1998) that ask participants to continuously narrate their flow of consciousness. In such cases, the participant's course of action is disturbed. In SEBE, think-aloud protocols are not necessary because first-person recording offers the unique possibility of resituating streams of consciousness within the pathway of action.

The final dichotomy transgressed by SEBE is of an ethical nature and concerns the power balance in the relationship between the researcher and the participants. Traditionally, when the participant agrees to take part in the study, the researcher oversees all aspects of the research. Participants can withdraw or have their data withdrawn, but in most cases, they act as passive actors in the research process. However, in SEBE, the participants are granted the power to start and stop the recording as they see fit, to watch it first if they are interested in doing so, and to return all or select parts of the recording to the researcher. While this autonomy might seem to create a power imbalance that favors the participants, the emphasis is on trust and the effort to build trust, which is the hallmark of any ethical relationship.

In view of these benefits, where is SEBE applied? It is used in a variety of contexts, from the transfer of professional expertise in industry and power plants to studying the ways in which Polish mothers take care of their children (Lahlou, Le Bellu, & Boesen-Mariani, 2015). Notably, this methodology has also been used to study creativity, specifically the practices of Easter egg decoration by craftswomen in northern Romania (Glăveanu & Lahlou, 2012). In these distinctive contexts, SEBE has been used to provide evidence of the complex dynamics through which people engage with their social and material environments and learn from them.

Because creative learning has a perspectival nature (Glăveanu et al., 2019), this methodology has many promising applications, including in workplace learning. In other words, participants learn from the intersection of their perspectives with those of others, and both can be well evidenced with the help of subjective cameras because people's actions reveal their position, perspective, and repositioning. In both learning and creativity, we reposition ourselves vis à vis others or the problem at hand. The ability to capture the moments in which such shifts in action and knowledge occur and to study them would be extremely valuable for workplace learning scholars. Moreover, having multiple participants in a workplace wear such cameras could help document how various perspectives harmonize or conflict. Hence, in SEBE, interviews are not only an occasion to study perspectival forms of workplace learning but also to actively stimulate the perspectives and processes of mutual learning and knowledge construction (Ness, 2017). Thus, SEBE could be a research and intervention tool that is useful for researchers and practitioners alike.

3 Empirical Case Examples

Next, we present two empirical examples. The first example illustrates the study of informal learning using ethnography in a virtual environment, and the example second illustrates the use

of subjective cameras in a SEBE process. Using these examples, we show how the basic principles of ethnography can be strengthened and applied in virtual environments and with the help of digital tools. Also, we aim to provide an understanding of the benefits and limitations of virtual ethnography and digital tools in ethnographic research.

3.1 Virtual Ethnography in Slack

In a recent research project called HeRMo: Ethical Human Resource Management Supporting Creativity in Finnish Growth Companies (2018–2022), we examined employee creativity and learning in technology work (Collin et al., 2020; Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). One of the aims of our research project was to understand personnel's learning at work in different work environments and situations. In technology-based work, there is an increasing demand for competence development and workplace learning, perhaps more so than in any other industry. For example, the demands of learning are well reflected in the fact that working in the software industry requires a deep understanding of key processes (Crawford & Barra, 2007). In technological work, continuous learning is not only a requirement of companies and the industry; it is also motivated by the employees themselves (Fuller & Unwin, 2003; Riddell et al., 2009) and considered an essential part of organizational operations (Scheeres et al., 2010). The development of technologies is reflected in everyday life in concrete terms; it does not make sense to formally teach employees about the latest technologies, as those technologies may be old in a week, a month, or a year (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). Work in the field of technology is strongly problem-based, and employees are involved in short-term loops of problem-driven learning (e.g., Havnes & Smeby, 2014; Nerland, 2008; Collin, 2006). Thus, it is suggested that learning in technology work takes place informally in everyday work and related interaction situations.

One essential environment for interaction in the field of technology is the virtual discussion environment, in which employees have the opportunity to seek advice and receive guidance from colleagues regardless of their physical location. For this reason, we decided to explore the manifestation of learning in virtual discussion channels, which we examined through virtual ethnography. In our case study, we asked: What kinds of learning situations manifest in the virtual discussion platform, and what are the strengths or challenges of researching learning in the virtual discussion platform? We selected one of the target organizations of our project as the case organization for our virtual ethnographic study: a medium-sized technology company in which staff have access to the Slack discussion channel. Participants in our case study—designers, engineers, developers, and other expert employees—developed new technological applications, environments, and solutions to meet the needs of different industries and customers but also used digital environments in their own everyday work. The data from the case study comprised 260 pages of saved authentic discussions from a virtual channel. Based on our case study, we highlight how we applied the basic principles of ethnography—its concepts and methods—in our virtual ethnographic study.

3.1.1 Entering the Virtual Field

Entering the field is the starting point for ethnographic research. When the object of research is a work organization and the field is understood to be the space in which processes, social interaction, goals, and boundaries emerge (Burrell, 2009), it can be said that a field is not one and the same permanent state or moment but rather an entity that includes a wide variety of environments and situations within an organization and its operations. At the beginning of the HeRMo project, the basic operations and practices of the organization were discussed with two key people. At this stage, these key people described that in addition to physical workspaces

and situations, the virtual Slack environment is an important environment for staff interaction. In Slack, things that come up are discussed, support and feedback are received from others, and problems are solved together. For this reason, it was agreed that, in addition to traditional observation and interview data, the discussions in the Slack channel would also be used as research material. This was also justified from the perspective of the *constructivist* conception of knowledge that guided the research. From the constructivist viewpoint, learning is built on social and linguistic interactions (Gergen, 1999), and its construction is observed more so at the level of the community (Bergen & Luckmann, 1994) than at the level of individual psychological structures and processes (Gergen, 1999). Thus, by focusing on interactions between people, ethnographic observation in the field offers researchers the possibility of understanding the sociocultural nature of workplace learning.

Our research team gained access to the Slack channel. The platform had several discussion channels thematically grouped around different topics. There were two channels for everyday and open discussion: (1) a channel focusing on work-related issues and (2) a channel for general and informal discussions. The research process began by exploring the channels and making general observations. First, it was found that several short discussions took place on both channels on a daily basis. Reading previous conversations and following up on ongoing discussions made it possible to make our first observations. In the informal discussion channel, the interactions were largely focused on workplace humor, discussion about leisure activities, and finding a lunch venue. The conversation was sporadic, made up of changing and occasional topics. In contrast, in the work-related channel, the discussions focused on the challenges and problems encountered at work, requests for help, and the sharing of information, as can be seen from the material example below.

Nickname A [12:12 PM]

In this context [refers to a previous discussion], what is the best way to share individual documents to clients (e.g. a meeting checklist)? Email directly to customers, right?

Nickname B [12:15 PM]

If you have to share [indicates the storage location of the folder], then the entire folder could be shared with the sharing settings "[indicates that setting]."

Nickname B [12:15]

But are there any other ways to share meeting checklists?

[Discussion continues...]

From the point of view of conducting research on workplace learning, work-related discussions seemed to provide the most relevant material for the purposes of our study. For this reason, it was decided that we would limit our data collection to the work channel. After a preliminary understanding of the discussion channels, our actual virtual fieldwork began.

Several factors are involved in planning and conducting fieldwork, such as the times at which and situations in which the researcher may be present. The researcher must accept that it is not possible to do fieldwork around the clock, and temporal boundaries must be set (Tuncalp & Le, 2014). To ensure that research data are adequate, it is necessary to assess how extended periods of fieldwork provide sufficient and reliable data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Thus, once our understanding of the scope, pace, and amount of discussion in the channel under study was tentatively established, we made a detailed plan for data collection. The researcher saved Slack channel conversations for 1 week. The researcher's role in the channel was to be a silent follower and observer—not a participant. Thus, the researcher did not influence the discussion in any way. So that an understanding of the field and phenomenon under study could

be constructed, the researcher read through the discussions of each day at the time the recordings were saved. It is important to note that the researcher who followed the Slack discussion also made physical observations and conducted interviews in the organization during the same period. In this way, the researcher's interpretation of the Slack data was combined with other observations made by the researcher. During the saving and reading of the Slack material, remarks and notes were written about the discussion. After 1 week of data collection, it was noticed that certain features were repeated throughout much of the discussions. Also, it was initially possible to ensure that the material provided an understanding related to the themes and questions of the study.

3.1.2 Glimpses of Learning Processes Through Events

To develop an understanding of the target organization and its learning situations, it is necessary to study the actors, their processes and practices, the frames that limit or enable them, and the goals that the organization seeks to achieve (Zilber, 2014; Lemmetty, 2020b; Collin, 2006). From this perspective, we wanted to look at the kinds of learning situations manifested on the Slack channel. We found that many questions were asked on the Slack channel, which were related to, for example, experiences of good practice, challenges with customers, lack of information, or individual solutions. Also, employees asked for tips on where or from whom to get information. The example below shows a typical discussion in which an employee put a description of a problem they were facing on the channel and received a response from a coworker in less than 1 minute, after which other people participated in the conversation. The event can be seen as a key event from the perspective of the learning situation, as it reflects a typical problem-solving event that was observed in the data.

Nickname A [11:45 AM]
does anyone else have a problem with the Hangouts Chrome extension blinking orange on the taskbar even though no new messages have arrived?

Nickname B [11:46 AM]
yes! :angry:

Nickname C [11:51 AM]
Yes, same problem here...

Nickname D [11:58 AM]
Yes

Nickname E [12:02 PM]
It's because if you're signed into Hangouts in Gmail and then, because it's a separate software, it will blink before you go to Gmail to read it. So you have to sign out of Hangouts in Gmail. [Colleague] talked about this.

Nickname F [12:38 PM]
It blinks here too! How do I sign out of Hangouts in Gmail?

Nickname G [12:40 PM]
Click on your own image to enter the menu

Nickname F [12:40 PM]
Oh!

Nickname E [1:14 PM]
For clarification: click on the image on the left. If you click the image on the right, everything disappears.

Nickname F [1:15 PM]
Yep, I found it! :slightly_smiling_face:

In examining a research target, problems are often identified regarding the extent of the field and its delineation. This reveals a particularly interesting question in the study of learning: When can we consider a learning situation to have begun or ended? According to the constructivist view of learning, learning is constructed based on previous understanding and knowledge; it is an ongoing process (Wenger, 2009). Organizational learning projects are

increasingly complex entities, and they operate across different environments. For example, training may be completed at an educational institution, but the application of what is learned takes place in the workplace. This perspective emerged strongly in the Slack material, especially when considering the benefits or limitations in the study of learning. If discussion on a virtual platform is the only material used in a research project, it excludes many other observations regarding learning processes. The material example below illustrates this challenge in concrete terms:

Nickname A [9:37 AM]

Hello everyone, Customer asked how easy it is to implement dynamic pricing in a ticket store? Any vision for this? In addition, tickets should be able to be priced differently depending on the time the ticket was purchased

Nickname B [9:38 AM]

No. you can come to talk with the [specific team name] team. We can show you the current implementation.

Nickname A [9:38 AM]

Alright, I will come there soon!

This example shows a glimpse of the learning process and that it was triggered by a customer question. However, an adequate response would seem to require a joint discussion with a particular team, as well as a demonstration of the “current implementation” mentioned in the example. For this reason, the conversation was not continued on the Slack channel, and the questioner moved from his workstation to engage in face-to-face conversations with the other team. Thus, it remains unclear how the incident progressed and how it ended. Several similar examples were found in the data. From this, it can also be seen that Slack serves as a good platform in the first stages of the learning process; however, in complex learning situations that require a great deal of discussion and illustration, Slack does not seem to be a useful environment.

In workplace learning research, identifying the learning context has been described as an important starting point in considering what people need to learn in a specific organization and why (e.g., Collin, 2006). In organizational research, the ethnographer links their observations within a broader context and at a specific time, in a particular place and sociocultural space, which contributes to the formation of theoretical generalizations. *Contextualization* refers to connecting data to the cultural environment and the historical macro level of time and place. For example, based on our research in technological organizations, learning seems to be highly intertwined with the problem-solving situations that emerge in everyday work and interaction, such as finding answers to client questions (see also Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). Moreover, in this field, learning is linked to the technological skills and competencies that people need to perform their work (Lemmetty, 2020b).

3.2 A Subjective Evidence-Based Ethnography (SEBE) Study of Craft Practices

A SEBE project usually follows a series of steps (Glăveanu & Lahlou, 2012). First, as in any other research process, a question needs to be formulated, which in this case was a question that is amenable to the purposes of ethnography (e.g., how participants act and interact in specific situations, how they learn, or how they create). Second, one or more participants should be identified whose experience is relevant to the research question and who is available for an in-depth study of their actions, including filming. Third, participants are asked to wear a camera while performing the activities of interest, often continuously, for a long time. This requirement is uncomfortable because the small camera is either part of a readymade headset

or placed on things that are used regularly by the person (e.g., a pair of glasses) or are easy to use (e.g., a visor). It is also likely that participants are inconvenienced in psychological terms by wearing a camera, although research has shown that they soon forget that their activity is being recorded. Moreover, they have full control over which activities are filmed and whether the recording is returned to the researcher. Fourth, the researcher reviews the recording and considers it through the lenses of the initial questions and the theoretical framework. At this stage, it is important to remain open to being surprised by the data and to use the findings to question assumptions. Finally, one of the most important parts of SEBE is an interview between the researcher and the participant based on the findings from the recorded data. If time allows, the interview can include viewing the entire recording. The interview can be conducted in multiple sessions or, more commonly, in critical moments that capture something of interest from the researcher's perspective. One of the most useful aspects of SEBE is that, at this stage, because participants view a first-person recording of their actions, they can be more easily re-situated within it, and even after 1- or 2-week intervals, they can remember surprisingly well what they were doing, what they were about to do next, and, most importantly, what they thought or felt at specific points in time (Tulving, 1972). The interview ultimately allows the researcher and participant to construct a joint account of what happened—one that includes more than a retelling of behaviors but is a true account of human actions comprised of intentions, meanings, reactions, and the effects of materials and other people on a participant's activity.

In what follows, we will briefly illustrate the use of SEBE by referring to a project focused on learning and creativity in community contexts in the case of craft practices (for details, see Glăveanu & Lahlou, 2012; Glăveanu, 2013). The main aim of this research was to understand how creative actions unfold in the case of experienced and novice Easter egg decorators in north Romanian communities. While this does not directly concern workplace contexts, key methodological lessons can be derived from this case study.

3.2.1. Setting up SEBE

One of the most important moments in conducting an SEBE has to do with entering the field. Because subjective cameras allow participants to record their own activities, it is crucial to first establish a close and ethical relationship with them—one based on transparency and accountability. In the craft case study, this was accomplished by starting with interviews of the participants that established the main points of reference concerning their activities and situated these activities within their life course. Through this, it was possible to choose which work sequences should be observed. In the research referred to here, the choice was made to include experienced egg decorators and novices (children) and observe them within a familiar context: painting eggs at home or at the local museum. In this way, adding the task of recording the session caused minimal disturbance to the participants' routines and allowed them to focus on the work itself rather than the presence of the researcher. Careful consideration must also be given to when the observed creative learning process begins and ends. This is important given that decorating eggs is not always a linear activity, and the unit of analysis can be established at the level of one egg or a batch of eggs worked on at the same time. Finally, the position of the subjective camera needs to be checked, and researchers ought to help participants set up their cameras (e.g., attach them to a pair of glasses if they have glasses) and explain how the recording starts and stops. Ethically speaking, the participants can use their right to withdraw from the research even after the recording has been made, and they can decide whether to give the tape to the researcher or only provide parts of it.

3.2.2. Analyzing SEBE data

One distinguishing characteristic of the data obtained through SEBE is that it can easily overburden the researcher. Recording videos, either with a subjective or a more “traditional” kind of camera, leaves younger researchers with considerable material to analyze. The important thing about SEBE is that video analysis is only part of the analytical process. With the egg decorators, the main interactions being analyzed were those between researcher and participant as they watched the subjective camera recording. In this case, due to the limited number of hours being recorded, it was possible to look over a whole video quickly. The focus was on the “pathways” of different actions (e.g., what kinds of phases or stages are specific to decoration and what their succession is) and how these action patterns differed between experts and novices. Unsurprisingly, the former took less time than the latter to decorate, and they also presented more habitual forms of painting eggs. In contrast, novices often went back and forth between stages and were sometimes a bit less certain of the outcome. SEBE data can be analyzed using different analytical procedures, from content and thematic analysis to conversational and discursive forms. This is because the main piece of data is not the video itself but the actions and interactions taking place in the researcher–researched–recording triad. Ultimately, this is where creativity unfolds and becomes manifest.

4 Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, we have described the idea and aim of ethnography, explained different ethnographic tools, and reflected on emerging future directions for utilizing virtual ethnography in researching workplace and organizational learning. Based on the core ethnographic concepts of field, context, and key events, we have described the roots and nature of ethnography as a methodology used in researching the social worlds of work as interpreted by acting and experiencing individuals and communities. Thus, at its best, ethnography connects and cuts across the objective and subjective worlds of work and learning, thus enabling researchers to grasp the phenomena at hand in a multifaceted manner. The findings of such research may lead to a deeper understanding of phenomena, which is sorely needed in scientific research because of the fast pace of changes in working life. This connection among psychological, social, and material dimensions is rare in other methodologies. Without close and detailed studies of the worlds of work, our conceptions of them will remain inadequate. Therefore, ethnography can be utilized to shed light on human actions that are rarely, if ever, predictable or in line with current theory or expert opinion. In organizational research, ethnographic work often takes issue with managerial claims or with highly generalized concepts that say little but assume much about what people do and think in their everyday working lives, including real actions that occur (or do not occur) in work settings.

However, changing requirements have challenged the work that people do and the learning embedded in work practices. As we have moved toward a deeper understanding of learning in workplaces and organizations, we have witnessed the emerging importance of remote work, virtual work, and the variety of digital tools utilized at work. By approaching learning in organizations in a mainly informal way, employees can no longer avoid learning in and through technological tools, apps, blogs, Google, YouTube, and virtual discussion platforms (Lemmetty & Collin, 2020). Therefore, we need new tools to adopt our research methods in the study of these changing learning environments. When the nature of learning changes, we need new applicable methodologies, such as virtual ethnography, to achieve a deeper

understanding of learning in workplaces and organizations. As a method and methodological approach, ethnography needs to evolve.

The potential of virtual ethnography and SEBE—the empirical case examples of new ethnographic tools provided in this chapter—for the study of workplace learning and multi-site working life is tremendous. However, in embarking on research, it is important to understand several ethical issues and the choices a researcher should make during the research process. The researcher's critical reflection on their role is especially important in virtual ethnography. Furthermore, because it is easy to enter the field, the informant's protection and consent might be neglected. It is also important for the researcher to consider ethical issues in relation to the goal and purpose of the research and to ensure that their choices are ethical and that the phases of the research process are visible. Clear guidelines for ethical reflections and choices in virtual ethnography do not always exist. However, Boellstorff et al.'s (2012) *Second Life* and Kozniets' (2015) *Netnography: Redefined* provided useful starting points.

Despite its laborious nature and the variety of ethical issues that need careful consideration throughout the research process, ethnography offers a methodology with a rich range of tools for the future study of learning in workplaces and organizations. Because ethnography is increasingly utilized, it may provide a continuously developing methodology that can meet the requirements for a deeper understanding of learning, especially in increasingly multifaceted areas of working life. Connecting new methods with the spirit of ethnography and considering ethical issues will lead researchers, especially ethnographers, along many interesting developmental paths. Moreover, it is possible that future research could return to the roots of ethnographic discovery because “the most important element of fieldwork is being there” (Fetterman, 2010), regardless of what “there” might mean in the future.

Index words:

- Ethnography
- Adult learning
- Workplace learning
- Organizational ethnography
- Field
- Context
- Event
- Virtual ethnography
- Subjective evidence-based ethnography

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